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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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IRAN-IRAQ: THE BATTLE FOR AMARAH

Summary

One of the largest concentrations of Iranian forces since the beginning of the war now is poised to attack Iraqi forces east of Amarah. The Iranian force apparently is designed to make maximum penetration into Iraq. Iraq's need to defend a broad front and its reliance on large numbers of militia and newly formed units afford the Iranians opportunity for significant gain. Regardless of the outcome, casualties will be high on both sides.

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Although tentative evidence suggests that debate in Tehran still continues over the wisdom of another major offensive, we believe the consensus among Iranian officials is that Iran has little to lose in launching one more such attack. If Iranian forces do no more than push Iraq out of Iranian territory--a distance of between 5 and 10 kilometers--Tehran can claim victory. Optimistically, Iran probably hopes to defeat Iraqi forces and capture significant Iraqi territory, in the hope of weakening the regime in Baghdad.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Office of Near East/South Asia Analysis. Comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division [redacted]

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The major risks for Iran are that it could lose much of its remaining war materiel, considerable manpower, and possibly even the option of major offensives in the near future. The Iranians have been slow and deliberate in their preparations east of Amarah, in an apparent effort to avoid repeating their costly defeats near Basrah last year in which they lost substantial men and equipment and made no significant gain.

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Nonetheless, the Iranians almost certainly will incur high casualties. The extra time Iran has taken to prepare its offensive has been used by the Iraqis to strengthen their forces and physical defenses in the area. If Iran's territorial gains near Amarah are not sufficient to justify substantial losses, the Iranian leadership may be forced to forgo large-scale offensives in the future. The probable consequence initially would be a war of attrition--artillery duels and skirmishes along the border. Meanwhile, the leverage of those officials in Tehran who argue for greater Iranian receptiveness to negotiating initiatives of Algeria and others presumably would be strengthened.

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Balance of Forces

Since last July, the weight of Iran's forces has shifted north from Basrah toward the Doveyrich River area some 60 kilometers east of Amarah. Additional forces have been brought from the Qasr-e Shirin and Sumar areas in the north. Iran probably has assembled at least 120,000 regular and irregular troops east of Amarah. The Iraqis have over 100,000 men to defend against the impending offensive.

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In the buildup area, the Iraqis are superior to Iran in every category of military equipment; for example, they have an advantage of at least two-to-one in armored vehicles and artillery. Iraq also has

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the advantages of defending from prepared positions. In addition, the Iraqis can call on an inventory of operational combat aircraft more than four times larger than Iran's.

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Iranian Forces

East of Amarah Iran has concentrated an armored division, an infantry division, and three independent brigades. A fourth brigade is being held in reserve. The Iranians have some 60,000 regular troops, at least 350 armored vehicles, and 125 artillery pieces in the area. In addition, Revolutionary Guards are there

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The Guard units, along with the militia volunteers, number at least 60,000 troops and, as in the past, probably will be used for spearheading the assault. Iran seems to be planning a mobile attack; large numbers of armored vehicles and self-propelled artillery are being moved to the front.

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Iran's air defense of the area will be provided by newly deployed HAWK SAMs and antiaircraft guns. Forward maneuver units will rely on SA-7 SAMs. Iran's Air Force, severely weakened by attrition and a policy of conservation, has been used primarily for reconnaissance and to provide air cover over Iranian rear areas since early in the war. It is not likely to have a critical impact on the outcome of this battle, even if thrown into the offensive.

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Iraqi Forces

Five reinforced Iraqi divisions with about 90,000 regular troops, 1,000 armored vehicles, and 350 artillery pieces are stationed east of Amarah. In addition, elements of 24 other infantry brigades--border guard, reserve, newly formed and irregular units--consisting of between 20,000 and 50,000 men are in the area. The forces are deployed behind a series of minefields, earthen berms, and trenches, but the physical defenses are neither as elaborate nor as concentrated as those the Iraqis prepared near Basrah in July 1982.

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Iranian Objectives

Iran's stated objective (probably the minimum one) east of Amarah is to push the Iraqis out of Iran in the Fakkeh area. We believe they also will try to deepen their penetration into Iraq to threaten Amarah and the main Baghdad-Amarah road. Although some Iranian leaders may harbor hopes of reaching Amarah, a more realistic military objective probably would be to push forward some ten kilometers to Iraq's second line of defensive trenching and dig-in before Iraqi armored reserves could effectively counterattack.

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Iraqi Vulnerabilities

The Iraqi defensive positions suffer from potentially serious weaknesses.

-- The local IV Corps commander

[Redacted] has a poor combat record.

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-- Half the Iraqi units now on the front lines east of Amarah are militia, reserve, or newly formed units. In the past, many militia and reserve units have collapsed under fire leading to Iranian breakthroughs.

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-- Unlike the relatively restricted area east of Basrah, the Iraqis at Amarah are forced to defend a broader front possibly allowing the Iranians to achieve tactical surprise and slowing the arrival of Iraqi reserves.

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Outlook

We estimate that Iran's chances are good for advancing at least several kilometers into Iraq at a few locations along the front. A breakthrough to Amarah is much less likely because of Iraq's firepower advantage, greater mobility, superiority in the air, and ability to funnel reinforcements into the battle. Iran could claim victory after achieving small advances, but for Iraq, success would require preventing a breakthrough while inflicting casualties massive enough to force Iran to abandon additional offensives.

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The fighting probably will spark a new round of Iraqi air attacks against Iranian shipping in the Gulf, and possibly the oil loading terminal at Kharg Island. Occasional Iraqi attacks against Kharg--the latest of which occurred on 17 January--have failed to inflict significant damage. The Iranians now are exporting about 2 million barrels of oil a day from this terminal.

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Two factors in this battle could significantly affect the ability of the two sides to continue the war after the engagement east of Amarah:

- For Iraq, crucial mistakes and declining troop morale could lead to an Iranian breakthrough, the rout of a major Iraqi unit, and substantial numbers of Iraqi casualties. This would shake the regime in Baghdad and leave it with a crippled military force unlikely to provide effective defense if Iran were to exploit its gains. Iraqi morale likely would decline rapidly if the Iranians achieved a significant breakthrough and Iraqi units found themselves outflanked, forced to retreat, or surrounded.
- For Iran, severe losses of men and materiel in the impending offensive would degrade its ability to pursue the war and could preclude future offensives on the scale of that being prepared east of Amarah. The high morale and fanaticism of Iran's infantry-- key factors in its past successes--were shaken by heavy casualties at Basrah in July 1982, some 25,000 casualties in two weeks.

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If territorial gains near Amarah are not significant enough to justify large numbers of casualties, the Iranian leadership may be faced with a population more reluctant to volunteer. Moreover, coupled with a military that cannot assure decisive victories, the leadership may be forced to abandon the hope that it can continue to stage large-scale offensives against Iraq that will ultimately topple the regime in Baghdad. In this situation, the war may continue as artillery duels and skirmishes along the border. Alternatively, such a situation could lead the Iranians to conclude that some advantage may be gained by showing greater interest in the negotiating proposals of Algeria and others.

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Peace Prospects.

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- The Algerian Foreign Minister visited Tehran from 2 to 4 January.
- On 9 January radio Tehran noted that Prime Minister Musavi chaired a meeting on Iran's rights under the 1975 Algiers Accord, which settled boundary disputes between Iran and Iraq. Attending the meeting were the Deputy Prime Minister, the Governor of the Central Bank, and the Ministers of Justice, Industry, Finance and Economic Affairs.

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Tehran's willingness to mention the meeting publicly suggests it at least intends to keep this channel open, perhaps with an eye toward the possible failure of future offensives against Iraqi forces. Heavy personnel and economic costs of the

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war, the need to mobilize resources for economic development, and continued lack of military gain would be motivations for Iran to change course.

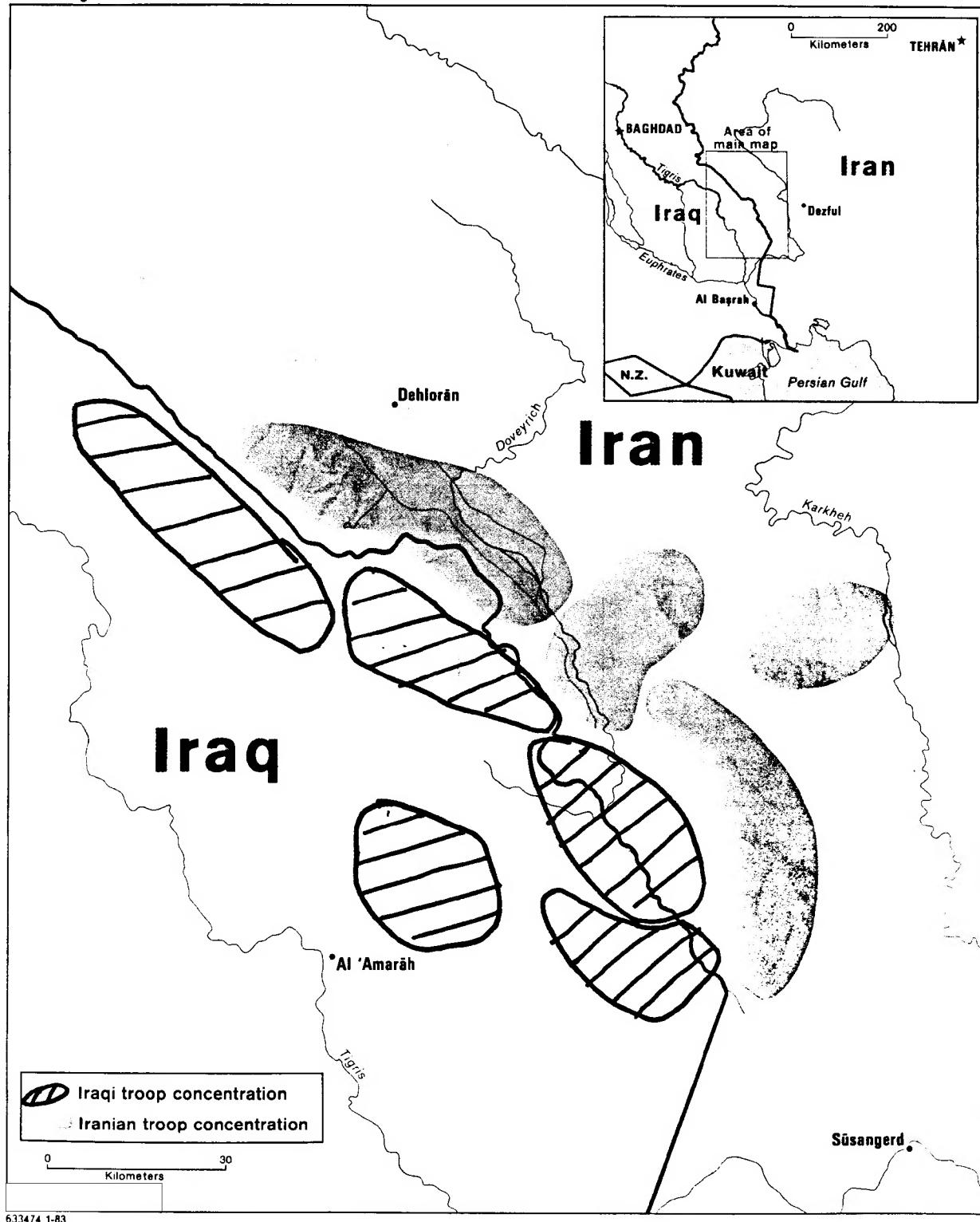
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Nonetheless, Khomeini remains in charge and will have to approve any negotiations. His is the final say no matter what the views of his advisers. So far, we have seen no evidence that he has softened his position on continuing the war.

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Doveyrich River Front



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